

**Cornel West, Review of Juan Luis Segundo, *Faith and Ideologies*,
Commonweal 111 (27 January 1984), 53-57.**

Liberation theologies are the principal forms of Christian prophetic thought and action in our contemporary age. They represent the ways of life and struggle of Christians around the world who have convinced remnants of the church to open its eyes to human misery and oppose socioeconomic systems and political structures that perpetuate such misery. Like all serious modes of inquiry, liberation theologies are predicated on crisis—on human situations of tremendous danger and incipient possibility. Such concrete crises invariably generate forms of critical consciousness. Liberation theologies are the predominant forms of critical consciousness within the Christian church that respond to the dangers of class, racial, and sexual privilege, and project the possibility of class, racial, and sexual equality.

Black, Feminist, Native American, Hispanic, and especially Latin American versions of liberation theology have made major contributions to Christian thought and the life of the church. The theological theme of God's identification with the poor and oppressed now resounds throughout our seminaries, takes shape in some of our ecclesiastical agencies, and regulates the practices in a select few of our churches. The methodological mandate for systemic social analysis of structures of domination in light of the good news of Jesus Christ is forcing many theologians, preachers, and laity to take seriously the works of Karl Marx and Max Weber, Simone de Beauvoir and W.E.B. Du Bois, Anthony Giddens, and Christopher Lasch. In short, liberation theologies have pushed religious thinkers beyond their usual parochial concerns and challenged churches to become more enlightened participants in the great political and economic issues of our time.

But beneath this intense intellectual ferment and heated political discourse lurks a hidden truth: *the high moment of liberation theology has passed*. The original texts of James Cone, Mary Daly, and Gustavo Gutierrez spawned widely diffused and dispersed theological currents. As with all ground-breaking upsurges, liberation theologies emerged with impressive power and insight and presently have evolved in diverse and multiple forms.

This evolution of liberation theologies is particularly noteworthy in that these theologies ushered forth from an academic discipline which suffers from an immense identity crisis. Hence, the early enthusiasm for liberation theologies can be attributed not only to the relevance of their perspectives for the oppressed but also to the hope that these theologies would breathe new life into a fading and faltering mode of intellectual reflection. To put it crudely, liberation theologies were expected to both change the world and keep theology alive.

Yet as the zenith of liberation theological reflection fades, we witness the proliferation of philosophical investigations, cultural critiques, social analyses, and historical reconstructions from Christian liberationist perspectives. The theological concerns of liberation theology are now shifting to either philosophical, cultural, social analytical, or historical concerns. This move requires not only rigorous interdisciplinary tools, but also more intense interaction with secular colleagues -- thereby facilitating more religious participation within the larger public conversation in society and culture at large.

This positive dialogue and candid alliance with both the Academy and political movements helps break down the walls of demarcation between divinity schools and universities, preachers and political activists. But it also could result in a new kind of theological evasion, a refusal to take

seriously the difficult task of specifying Christian identity in a pluralistic world. And as the tentacles of secular professionalism and vulgar politicization further pervade our seminaries and divinity schools, even the theological task itself could become passé.

In regard to this precarious though pregnant situation, liberation theologies more than likely will move in one of four directions. They will: (1) relapse back into traditional kinds of systematic theology equipped with new themes, motifs, and insights—as in Jon Sobrino's *Christology at the Crossroads*; (2) retreat into versions of philosophical anthropology (that is, a philosophy of human existence) which appeal to Kant, Hegel, Feuerbach, or the early Marx and thereby subvert systematic theology—as in Juan Luis Segundo's *The Liberation of Theology*; (3) spill over into social theory, cultural criticism, and historical reconstruction which may take either Christian or post-Christian forms—as in Elisabeth Schüssler-Fiorenza's *In Memory of Her* or Mary Daly's *Gynecology*, respectively; or (4) resort to practical writings in journalistic styles which attempt to reach the general literate laity and clergy—as in James Cone's *My Soul Looks Back*.

The first alternative is essential but limited; it preserves precious links with elements of the tradition and church but at the inescapable expense of intellectual marginality in our secular intellectual milieu. The second option, philosophic anthropology, is a trap to be avoided by both theologians and philosophers alike; it succumbs to a seductive quest for universal categorical schemas that yield either formal results too empty for usefulness or transcendental frameworks that conceal their historicity. The third line of development is the most fruitful and challenging; it sidelines many narrowly trained theologians and gives prominence to Christian and secular social theorists, cultural

critics, and historians. The last direction performs a crucial propagandistic role, but provides little, if any, intellectual depth.

Juan Luis Segundo's *Faith and Ideologies* exemplifies the second option. This book builds on his earlier work and puts forward a full-blown philosophical anthropology—a detailed specification of "the universal dimensions of human beings." Segundo is the most ambitious and audacious of the Latin American liberation religious thinkers. He disregards the traditional intellectual division of labor in the university and eagerly pursues a daring idea; no matter how half-baked that idea may be. In this book, Segundo's ambition and audacity lead to organizational fragmentation and philosophical confusion.

Segundo's aim in this text is threefold. First, to infuse new content in the categorical notions of faith and ideology. Second, to explore how these two ideas relate to one another, using Christianity and Marxism as interlocutors. Third, to examine the concrete situation of present-day Latin America in light of his philosophical perspective. Like Immanuel Kant and Matthew Arnold, Segundo wants to preserve the transcendent character of moral conduct yet create a comprehensive secular discourse which subsumes religion. In short, his primary intention is to displace theology and put forward a new philosophical anthropology.

But in Chapter I entitled "Toward A New Statement of the Problem," it becomes quite clear that Segundo's philosophical anthropology is not new at all. Rather it is a warmed-over version of neo-Kantianism—much less refined than those found in Wilhelm Dilthey or Jürgen Habermas. Segundo's two "basic anthropological dimensions" are faith and ideology. He understands "' faith" to be the human acquisition of meaning and value principally by means of socialization. "Ideology"

is taken to be the human techniques of efficacy and predictability necessary to actualize one's value-laden ends or goals.

Following Gregory Bateson's *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, Segundo defines faith as a "partially self-validating" set of "epistemological and ontological premises" which human beings impose on "the flux of happenings" for purposes of order and coherence. Since these "premises" circumscribe the limits of human knowledge, they are immune from rational validation, hence "self-validating." Yet Segundo also defines faith as a "certain type of knowledge." Here confusion sets in. Can faith be a set of "premises" which delimit what we can and do know and also be a certain type of knowledge? Is the latter a transcendental form of knowledge, a special kind of knowledge that enables us to know the premises that constitute preconditions for knowledge? Is this not viciously circular? Or does Segundo mean that the premises are socially derived and hence we know them through social and historical analysis? If so, then can he consistently claim that faith is "an anthropological dimension as universal as the human species itself"? Surely not. He must either fall back on neo-Kantianism and provide an account of faith as an anthropological dimension or adopt a Mannheimian sociology of knowledge and give up talk about such dimensions. At one point in his text, Segundo endorses Mannheim's "real sociology of knowledge" yet still characterizes the indispensable unconditional absolute as a value, a "transcendent datum." Like Kant of the *Critique of Practical Reason*, philosophical anthropology has solely a self-validating, *i.e.*, moral basis. But, following Mannheim, if morality is socially constituted, philosophical anthropology is undercut.

To add more confusion, Segundo understands faith as "the fund of saved energy on which all human planning is based." In addition to this technocratic image of faith, Segundo's attempt to link

this conception of faith to his overarching theory of evolution -- with its desirable homeostatic mechanisms and the "best energy calculus"—is utterly unconvincing. Owing to his imprecise and amorphous definitions of faith, it is difficult to follow his comparative criticisms of Pannenberg's notion of trust and Tracy's conception of religion.

In his discussion of faith, Segundo relies upon a pre-Wittgensteinian view of language. That is, in contrast to Wittgenstein's view that language constitutes our social world, Segundo holds that language expresses private worlds. In order to make clear how people "express in words their values-structure, their meaning-world," Segundo engages in some close readings of poems -- especially Gustavo Adolfo Bécquer's famous *Rima*. After a rather idiosyncratic though interesting interpretation, Segundo highlights human "access, through the medium of language, to the vast, structured realm of meaning and values." This neo-Kantian vocabulary, found in Ernst Cassirer and Susanne K. Langer, is highly suspect. Yet, ironically, Segundo persists with this expressivist view of language even after invoking the work of the later Wittgenstein which precludes any such view. At this point one is forced to conclude that Segundo's intellectual project yields philosophical confusion.

Similar to Habermas, Segundo fears that meaning-structures (faith) are "structured in terms of efficacy (ideology) alone." That is, issues involving value are reduced to technical matters. And this fear is justified. But is not his own technocratic conception of faith a reduction of meaning to mere use, planning, and efficacy? If so, he promotes the very program he fears. Segundo rightly exposes the dimension of faith in modern and postmodern science—a point noted by David Hume and refined by Michael Polanyi—yet his means-ends mode of philosophical and political analysis

reeks of technocratic rationality. Even John Dewey, no friend of modern Luddites like Martin Heidegger, grappled more seriously with the reductionist implications and managerial consequences of crude means-ends analyses.

The second and third parts of Segundo's book are much better than the first. The section on Christianity and Marxism is, though far from original, competent. His claims regarding Marx's rejection of philosophy for science and opposition to ontological materialism are persuasive. Yet his defense of Erich Fromm's claim that Marx put forward a philosophical anthropology—which is true for the early Marx but rejected by the later Marx—is perplexing. Segundo rightly suggests that the continuity between the early and later Marx consists of his "ideal conception of the human being." But does such an ideal constitute a philosophical anthropology? Does the mere possession of values mean that one adheres to a philosophical anthropology? Surely not. So why defend Fromm's exorbitant claim?

The last section of Segundo's book is a sketch of "a Latin American anthropology"—a reading of Latin American realities from 1950-1975 in light of his philosophical perspective. After brief generalizations of the periods of consciousness-raising, violent action, and repression, Segundo tries to go beyond mere economic and political analysis and accents "the ecological state of human beings" in relation to nature, the state, and class exploitation. He ends his book calling for the creation of "an effective cultural tradition"—a task to be achieved only if the supreme evolutionary quality, flexibility, is internalized and transmitted to the younger generation of freedom fighters.

In stark contrast to *The Liberation of Theology*, Segundo's *Faith and Ideologies* is more a phenomenon than an event, a symptom of the second alternative in the evolution of liberation

theologies rather than a mover and shaker on the contemporary scene. His book illustrates the severe limitations of opting for a full-blown philosophical anthropology. And even if one decides to do so, it is better to revise already refined versions rather than create one's own out of thin air or derived from anthropologists and psychologists.

In my opinion, the major intellectual task of liberation theologians is to continue to reexamine and reshape the traditional doctrines of the church, engage in more serious efforts of social theory, cultural criticism, and historical reconstruction, and write palpable and intelligible essays and texts for the nonacademic literate laity and clergy. Needless to say, these three activities require different persons working on different terrains. The church theologians are not likely to put forward sophisticated social analyses, just as the more broadly engaged social theorist cannot possibly do justice to the complexities of church theology—though both can write for a wider audience.

Furthermore, if liberation theologies have taught us anything, it is that Christian thinkers must be organically linked with prophetic churches and progressive movements. An uncommitted and detached liberation theologian is a contradiction in terms. Without some form of ecclesiastical and political praxis, critical consciousness becomes as sounding brass and theological reflection a tinkling cymbal.